

PREVENTING SUICIDE AT SCHOOL

The Role of Teachers and Other Professionals Working in Schools



HOW TEACHERS CAN PREVENT SUICIDE

Teachers have a crucial role to play in preventing suicide among students. They have daily contact with students at different age stages. Each age stage entails specific challenges and difficulties. The rapid physical development and deep emotional changes that happen during adolescence make these young people experience life stressors differently.

For many young people, adolescence is a time of exploring new opportunities and freedoms. However, this period could also cause anxiety about academic performance, relationships and the future. Therefore, occasional emotional distress is normal in adolescence, but for some young people, if the distress becomes long-lasting or overwhelming, it can lead to difficulties in everyday life, disrupt daily functioning and develop mental health problems, such as depressions which also could lead to suicidal thoughts and acts. For this reason teachers, who are on the front, are significant important in identifying and preventing suicide among adolescents and youth and they should be well trained to get familiar with the normal behavior of their students, notice changes and take action when they suspect a student at risk.

GENERAL FACTS ABOUT SUICIDE

Suicide knows no boundaries. It happens among people of all ages and incomes, all ethnic and religious groups, and all parts of the world. Emotional consequences of suicide can be long lasting and take a heavy toll on those left behind. According to WHO suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 years old; forming nearly one third of all suicides that occur globally.

Nonetheless, suicide can be prevented. When individuals, schools, and communities combine efforts to address suicide, they can save lives.

WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE WORRIED

1. Talk to the student in a private space, conveying your concerns, and actively listen to what they say without judgment. Ask questions that convey your understanding of what the student is going through and normalizing the fact that sometimes people may feel down or distressed when they are under a lot of pressure.
2. Encourage the student to speak to someone they trust, such as a parent or other trusted family member, adult or social/psychological worker at the school. Offer to speak with the person identified but do not do so unless the student agrees.
3. If the student has attempted to, or indicates that they are about to, intentionally harm themselves, seek immediate support from services available either within the school system (such as a social/psychological worker) or health services in the community. Do not leave the student alone and make sure the student is in a secure environment supervised by a caring adult until taken to the care of the available services.



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IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO MAY BE AT RISK OF SUICIDE

Factors that Increase Suicide Risk

There are many factors that may increase a student's risk for suicide. They may vary among different cultures. The most significant ones may include:

- Mental health disorders, such as depression or anxiety
- Early negative life experiences such as childhood abuse, neglect or trauma
- Exposure to suicide of another person directly or indirectly through media coverage or by word of mouth
- Easy access to means of suicide such as guns or medications
- Previous suicide attempts
- Stressful life circumstances such as school problems, strict academic disciplinary and curricula, family problems, relationships problems, marital conflicts, love affairs or bullying. Traditional norms and values and traditional gender norms and perceptions towards others

Suicide is a complex and multifactorial problem. It never has one single cause and it develops due to an interaction between risk factors in combination with a lack of protective factors. A life stressor can serve as a tipping point and trigger suicidal behavior in adolescents who are already at increased risk for suicide.



Warning Signs to Look Out for Among Students

- Expressing thoughts, feelings or plans about ending their life, including through stories or pictures
- A sudden or dramatic change in academic performance
- Changes in mood, for example regularly becoming tearful, crying, or displaying severe emotional distress
- Expressing hopelessness about the future
- Showing marked changes in behaviour such as a withdrawal from others, loss of interest in activities they usually enjoy, or an increase in anger, hostility, agitation, irritability or impulsivity
- Disruptive behavior, including conflict with other students or school staff
- Increase in absences from school or difficulty in concentrating during lessons
- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Bullying or breakdown of relationships with peers
- Students who appear to be lonely and cannot easily make friends with others
- Self-harm which can be a form of coping with stressful life events, but in other cases it can be an important red flag for a suicide attempt

Pay particular attention to changes in mood and behaviour at times of stress, for example in the lead-up to exams or before or during other major changes in a student's life. Serious attention must be heeded when any of the warning signs becomes the new behavior for the student or a behavior that has increased due to anticipated or actual painful event, loss, or change.



WHAT YOU CAN DO AS HEAD OF A SCHOOL

1. Organize information sessions and mental health promotion activities for students to support their mental health and well-being, and provide training sessions to enhance students' cognitive, emotional and social skills to help them cope with stressful situations
2. Organize training for staff on recognizing and managing mental health problems and looking out for signs that a student may be at risk of suicide
3. Create a culture at school that promotes as trust and safety for students to be able to share their difficulties and mental health problems
4. Foster trusting relationships between teachers and students to maximize the likelihood that students will talk to teachers if they are thinking about suicide
5. Organize and encourage activities that promote the good mental health of staff members
6. Design and implement a postvention plan for how to sensitively manage and communicate the suicide or suicide attempt of a student or a member of staff to the school community in a way that minimizes further distress. Measures should include the availability of trained social/psychological workers and support services for students, parents, and staff